

Boyhood of Lincoln



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INSTRUCTOR LITERATURE SERIES

THE BOYHOOD OF LINCOLN

By Harriet G. Reiter



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The Boyhood of Lincoln

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A great many years ago a brave man found his way through a gap in the mountains. He stood on the hills and looked over the lovely land of Kentucky. There were deep forests and open grassy places. Bears and wild turkeys and all kinds of game were in the woods. Great herds of buffalo roamed over the hills. It all looked so peaceful and beautiful that it seemed to be prepared by the hand of God for the use of man.

But Indians went on the warpath through those beautiful forests. They lay in wait along the streams with tomahawks ready, for any white men who might come to their favorite hunting ground. The scalps of many brave hunters hung from their belts. One never knew what bush or tree might hide a painted savage.

The man that stood on the hill and looked over this country was Daniel Boone. He well

knew all the danger that was hidden in the forest. But he loved the blue-grass fields, the forests full of game, and the hills. He said the Indians should not keep him out, for he was going to make his home in Kentucky, in spite of them.

And so he climbed down the hill and went into Kentucky. He staid there some time and went from place to place. He had always to hide from the Indians. He had to walk so as to leave no trail. He had to be careful of his campfire so it would not smoke while burning, and when it was out, to scatter the ashes so as to leave no trace. He tried in every way to keep the Indians from knowing there was a white man near.

Many times he was in great danger, but at last when he was ready to leave the country, he loved it more than ever. He felt that nothing would keep him from coming back to live there. Daniel Boone carried news of this rich country back to his friends and neighbors and many decided to return with him. There were no roads across the mountains, and there were but two ways to get to this land of Kentucky. They could float down the Ohio River, or they could

come through a gap in the mountains, and down a trail called the Wilderness Road. The Ohio River was so dangerous from Indians that few chose that way.

Most of the new settlers came by the Wilderness Road. Several would come together, as that was safer. They carried their goods in packs on horses, but it was little that they could carry with them. A camp kettle maybe, some corn for meal, powder and bullets for their rifles, and a little clothing was usually what they carried into the new country. Sometimes in fording streams, or in Indian attacks, even these few things were lost.

Now there was a man in Virginia named Abraham Lincoln who lived near the road where these pioneers passed in going to their new homes. They often stopped at his house and talked with him, until at last he wanted to go to Kentucky, too. He sold his land and made a journey there. He stayed several months and then came back for his family. We do not know how Mr. Lincoln got his wife and four children through the gap and down the Wilderness Road, but it must have been a very hard trip, for the road was rough and dangerous.

The young Lincoln children saw the buffalo roaming over the blue-grass fields. These animals were not yet afraid of men, for they did not know of the white man's gun. Bands of Indians still lurked in the forests, and the settlers had always to be on guard for their lives. The pioneers wore shirts and trousers of buck-skin, and coonskin caps made so the tails hung down their backs. When the Indians were on the warpath they could outrun and outfight them.

Abraham Lincoln settled on some land near the Ohio River. He built his log cabin and started to clear his land by cutting down the trees. One morning he took his three boys, Mordecai, Josiah, and Thomas to work in the clearing. They had hardly gotten there when a shot rang out fired by an Indian hid in the edge of the woods, and Mr. Lincoln fell dead.

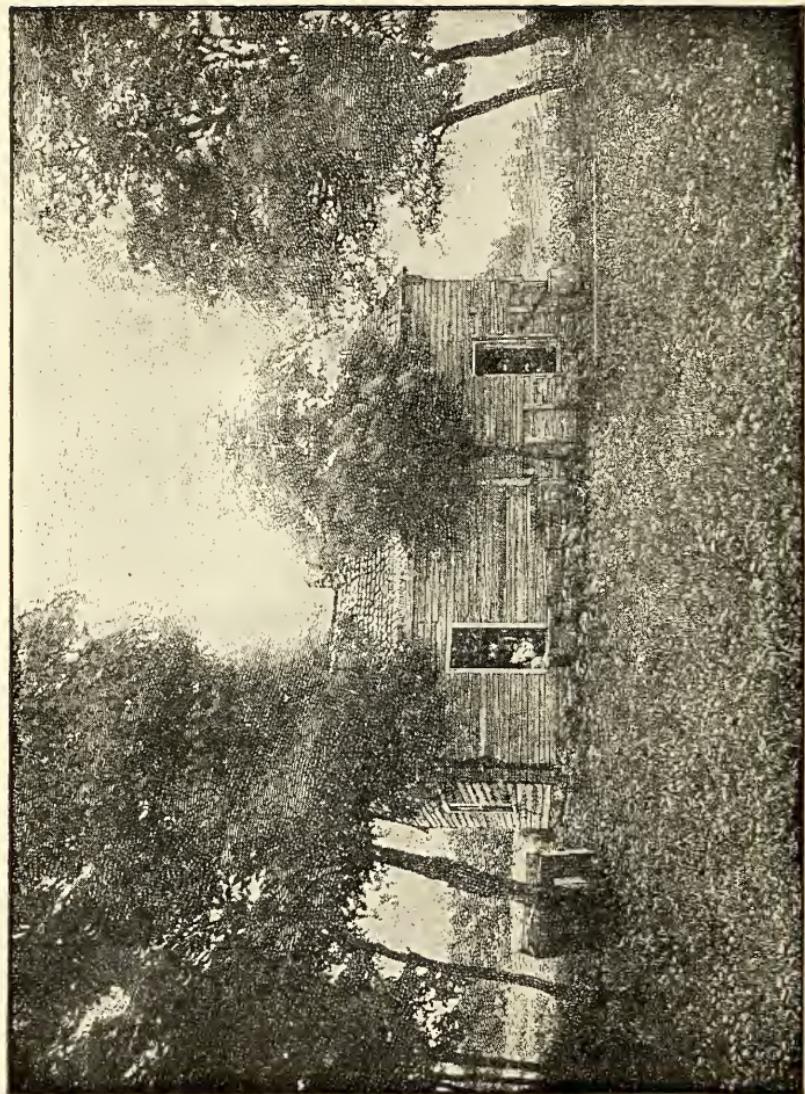
Josiah ran as fast as he could go to the nearest fort for help. Mordecai ran to the cabin for a gun. Little Thomas was left by his dead father's side. Mordecai seized a gun and stuck it through a crack in the logs. The Indian was just ready to carry off little Thomas. The big brother had to aim carefully so as not to kill

the little fellow. He aimed at a white ornament on the Indian's breast and fired. His aim was true and the savage fell dead by Mr. Lincoln. Thomas Lincoln's life was saved and he became the father of our loved President, Abraham Lincoln.

As soon as he was free, the little boy ran to the house and to his mother's arms. Men soon came from the fort with Josiah and they took up the bodies of Mr. Lincoln and the Indian. It was sad, indeed, for the family in this new country to lose their father. But it was worse for little Tom than for any of the rest.

They had as much as their neighbors, but no one at that time owned much but land. Mrs. Lincoln soon moved away to another county, and Mordecai, the boy who killed the Indian, got his father's land. He always hated the Indians bitterly, and it is said, killed many; he was well known also as a great story teller.

But little Thomas grew up very poor. He had to go out as a poor working boy before he had even learned to read. Indeed he never did learn to read, and could only write his name. But he was honest, sober, good-natured, and loved by every one, though if the truth must



House Near Beechland, Ky., In Which Thomas Lincoln and Nancy Hanks Were Married.

be told, he never cared to work very hard.

After a while he learned to be a carpenter and worked about from place to place. He was a good carpenter for those days and had a fine set of tools. The cabins were built almost all with an ax. No nails were used. The logs were hewn, the doors and rude wooden shutters were hung on leather hinges and fastened with wooden pins. There was no glass in the windows but sometimes there was greased paper.

Mr. Lincoln did not care much for work. When some one came and offered him a job he would take it and do the work well, but he did not go about looking for something to do.

One of the men he worked for was Mr. Berry. Now, Mrs. Berry had a niece, Nancy Hanks, who lived with her, and who was a sweet and lovely girl. The Hanks family had come from Virginia about the same time the Lincolns did. Then Nancy's father and mother died and a family of eight children were left. The children were scattered, and Nancy went to live with her aunt.

There, Tom Lincoln fell in love with her and they were married. Would you like to know about the wedding? You may be sure it was

not much like the weddings now-a-days. In pioneer times weddings were rude and boisterous. After the Lincoln wedding there was an infare. All the neighbors were invited, and even strangers who happened to be near. They had a great feast of bear meat, venison, wild turkey, and ducks. Maple sugar hung from a string and when any one wanted a piece for his coffee he bit it off. There were great gourds full of wild honey, maple syrup, and peaches. The families had roasted a sheep, whole, over a pit of coals covered with green boughs to keep the juice in.

The Lincolns went to housekeeping in a log cabin in Elizabethtown. The whole house was only as large as a small room, but it was as good as the most of their neighbors. Very few people at that time in Kentucky had any other than log houses. Even the churches and school houses were built of logs.

But carpenters could not earn much money for there were no sawmills to get the lumber ready, so Mr. Lincoln decided the next year to move his wife and baby girl to a farm. There he could kill game for the meat and raise corn for the bread.

The neighbors came and helped roll the logs for the new house. It had one room, one door, and one window. A huge chimney of sticks was built outside. The family had a cow and calf, a good feather-bed, pots, and kettles. Mrs. Lincoln had a loom and wheel which she used in making the cloth for their clothing. For you know at that time every thing had to be made at home. People could not go to the store and buy cloth as they do now.

Near the cabin was a spring of clear water flowing out of a cleft in the rocks. Forest trees shaded the spring, and wild flowers and ferns grew about it. In the woods about the cabin were deer and flocks of wild turkeys.

It was in this log cabin in the woods that a little son was born to Thomas and Nancy Lincoln, February 12, 1809. The child was named Abraham, after his grandfather who had been killed by the Indians.

A happy family lived in that one room. What softer cradle could a baby have than his mother's arms? And what did the little Lincoln children care that they were poor? They had no toys for they had no money to buy them, but the country has many pleasures for children

which are unknown to those of large places.

Little Abe and Sarah played with other children in the shavings of their father's carpenter shop. They picked wild berries and hunted coons and squirrels and then they liked to fish.

One day when Abe was coming home with a string of fish he met a soldier. His mother had told him he must always be kind to soldiers so he gave him his fish and went home without any.

One of his playmates was named Austin Gollaher and one day Austin saved Abe's life. This is the way Mr. Gollaher told the story when he was an old man:

"One Sunday my mother visited the Lincolns, and I was taken along. Abe and I played around all day. Finally we concluded to cross the creek to hunt for some partridges young Lincoln had seen the day before. The creek was swollen by recent rains, and, in crossing the narrow footlog, Abe fell in. Neither of us could swim. I got a long pole and held it out to Abe, who grabbed it. Then I pulled him ashore. He was almost dead, and I was badly scared. I rolled and pounded him in good

*Life of Abraham Lincoln.—*Tarbell.*

earnest. Then I got him by the arms and shook him, the water pouring out of his mouth. By this means I succeeded in bringing him to, and he was soon all right.

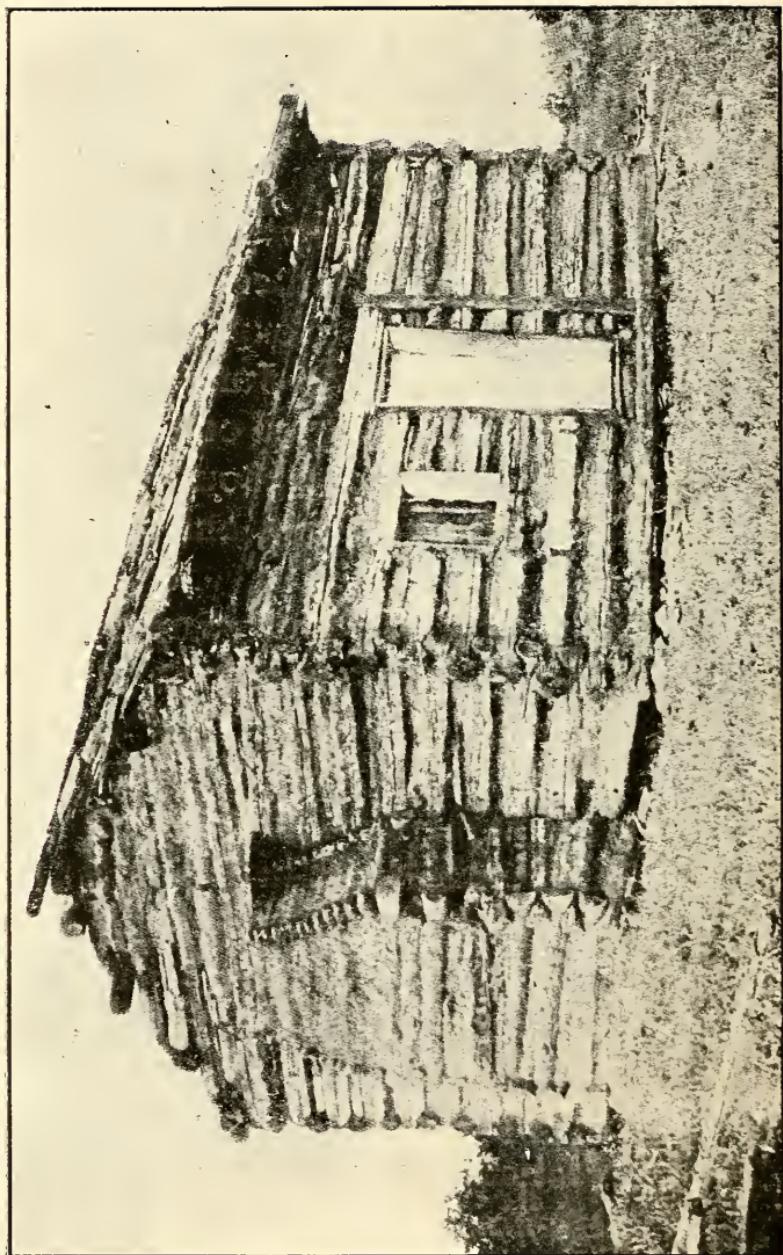
“Then a new difficulty confronted us. If our mothers discovered our wet clothes they would whip us. This we dreaded from experience and determined to avoid. It was June, the sun was very warm, and we soon dried our clothing by spreading it on the rocks about us. We promised never to tell the story, and I never did until after Lincoln’s death.”

When little Abe was about four years old his father moved the family to another farm and he was started to school. His first teacher was named Zachariah Riney. The school houses then were of logs, and often had no floor but the ground. Pegs were driven in the walls and boards laid across them for desks. Short logs were split in two for benches to sit on. A big fireplace kept the room warm.

Nothing was taught in the schools but reading, writing and “ciphering.” Riney could not teach his pupils much for he had only one book and that was a spelling book. It had easy reading lessons in it also.

HOUSE IN WHICH ABRAHAM LINCOLN WAS BORN

Three miles from Hodgenville, LaRue county, Kentucky. It was torn down long ago, but the logs were saved. The land has been purchased and a suitable memorial building erected, inside of which the cabin has been rebuilt.



It is said that Lincoln studied harder and learned faster than any one else in school. He got spicewood bushes and hacked them upon a log and burned two or three at a time to make a light to see to study by.

Though there were not any books to be had, Mrs. Lincoln knew lots of Bible stories, fairy stories, and Indian stories. She used to take the children on her knee in the evening, when a big fire in the fireplace sent bright flames dancing up the chimney, and tell them stories.

In those pioneer times preachers rode about from place to place on horseback. They held meetings wherever they could, sometimes out of doors, and sometimes in log churches. One of these preachers was David Elkins, and Abe loved him dearly. One of the things that the little boy liked to do best was to play at preaching. He would gather his playmates about him and preach and pound until he had them all half scared to death.

The boy had to help his father about the farm as soon as he was old enough. When the men were working in the fields he carried them water. He picked wild berries in the woods. One time when they were planting corn, Abe

had to drop pumpkin seed in every other hill. The next day came a big rain. The water ran down the hillside in such torrents that it washed corn, and pumpkin seed, and even the dirt itself off of the field.

Years after, when this boy had become a great man, and was President of the United States, a visitor at the White House, which was then his home, asked: "Mr. President, how would you like when the war is over to visit your old home in Kentucky?"

"I would like it very much," Mr. Lincoln said. "I remember that old home very well. Our farm was composed of three fields. It lay in the valley surrounded by high hills and deep gorges. Sometimes when there came a big rain in the hills the water would come down through the gorges and spread all over the farm."

Then he told of the time when after they had planted the corn in the "big field"—seven acres—there came a big rain in the hills though it did not rain a drop in the valley, and washed away the seed and soil, too.

When Abraham was seven years old a most exciting thing happened. His father moved from Kentucky to Indiana. Mr. Lincoln built

a raft and loaded his tools and some other things on it and floated down the river. But alas the raft upset and there were his goods and tools in the bottom of the river. However, he managed to straighten the raft and get some of his things and again start on his journey. When he got across the river he hired an ox team to take them to the new place. Then he went back for his wife and children.

The family had had to live the best they could while the father was gone. They slept on a bedticking stuffed with leaves and husks. Abe snared game for the dinnerpot and chopped wood for the fire. Between times the children went to school to Caleb Hazel, who also taught school with only one book.

When Mr. Lincoln got back, they loaded two horses with the rest of their goods and set out through the forest for the new home. It took them seven days to make the journey and each day was full of delightful adventures to the children.

At night they slept on a pile of pine boughs, in the daytime they had often to cut their way with an ax through thickets. Sometimes they had to ford streams. They saw many strange

birds and animals. It was fortunate that no rain fell all the week they were on the way, and the nights were cool and pleasant.

When they came to their new place, they chose a grassy knoll in the heart of a big forest for their home. It was late in the autumn, too late to build a house. Mr. Lincoln gave Abe an ax and set him to work clearing the ground. Then they built a half-faced camp of posts and poles. It was open on one side with only a curtain of skins. A stick fireplace was built in one end, and in this poor place Abraham Lincoln spent his first winter in Indiana. This new home was near Little Pigeon creek, about fifteen miles from the Ohio river and one mile and a half from a place known as Gentryville, in Spencer county.

He was now nearly eight years old, and was a very tall, long-legged little boy. His mother made him linsey-woolsey shirts dyed with colors she made herself out of barks and roots. His trousers were made of deerskin, and also his hunting shirt. His feet were covered with moccasins, and his head with a coon skin cap. The tail hanging down behind made a nice handle by which to carry it.

Times were hard, the pioneers had very little money, and even if they had had money there was no place to buy things. They used thorns for pins, and buttoned their clothes with pieces of cork covered with cloth, or cut out bone buttons. Coffee was made of browned crusts of bread, and tea of leaves of some kinds of herbs.

But there was a salt lick near the Lincoln's home and when the deer came there Thomas Lincoln could always get plenty of meat. There were also wild turkeys, squirrels, and even bears thick in the woods. The streams were full of fish. One time Abe saw a flock of wild turkeys feeding near the cabin. He ran in and poked his father's rifle out through a crack in the walls, took aim and fired. A fine turkey fell dead. He did not know whether to feel glad or sorry. He was glad because he had not missed his game, and sorry because he had taken a life. He said himself that he never after pulled a trigger on any larger game.

The next year Abe and his father set to work to cut down trees and get the logs ready for their new cabin. When all was ready the neighbors for miles around gathered in to help put up the cabin. It had one room and a loft above.

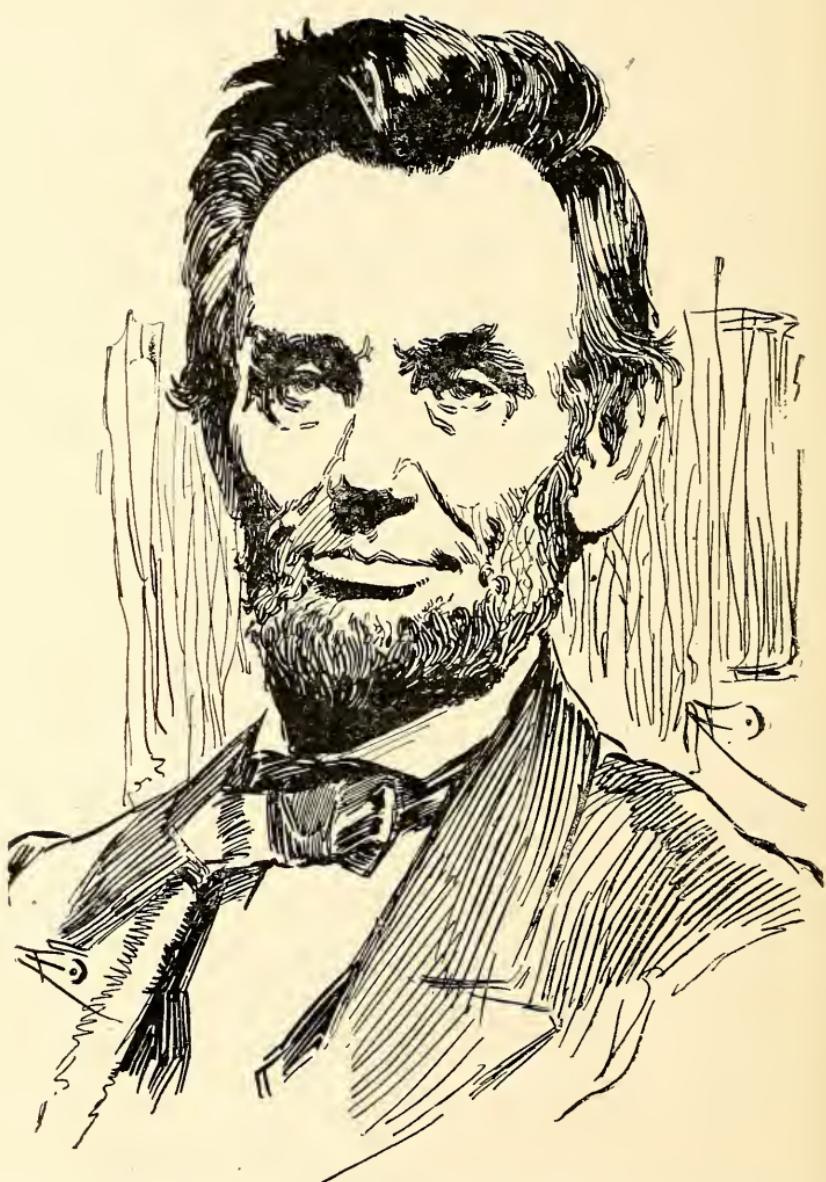
There was no door, or window, or floor. Not even a deer skin hung over the opening nor was there any greased paper in the window.

Mr. Lincoln and Abe made the furniture. The table and chairs were rough slabs of wood set up on pegs. In one corner of the cabin was built a bed. Only one leg was needed and that at the outer corner. A stake was driven in the ground and from this, stout poles were fastened over to the walls. This made the frame. Split "shakes" were laid across this and the bed was ready for the mattress. This was filled with cornhusks or leaves. Abe slept in the loft and he climbed nimbly to his place by means of pegs driven in the wall, and his poor bed was only a heap of dried leaves in one corner. They had no crockery dishes. What few they had were pewter and they also used gourds for dishes. The spoons were iron and the knives and forks had horn handles.

Thomas Lincoln tried to raise enough corn for cornpone on week days, and enough wheat for wheat cakes on Sunday. But it was hard to get the corn ground into meal, sometimes it had to be grated in a piece of old tin punched full of holes. There were not many vegetables raised

but potatoes, and sometimes they were the only thing the Lincolns had to eat. It is no wonder the children grew tired of them. One time when there was nothing else on the table, and the father asked a blessing on this poor fare, little Abe remarked that "they were mighty poor blessings." One of the neighbors said that one time when they were spending the evening at Lincoln's, potatoes were washed and pared and handed around to eat raw as we eat apples. Then potatoes had another use. Mrs. Lincoln would give the children hot baked potatoes to hold in their hands when they went to school on bitter cold days.

In helping to build their house the young backwoods boy learned to use a maul, and wedge, and axe. His father taught him how to "rive" shingles from a slab of wood, and how to split rails out of the logs. Doing this heavy work hardened his muscles and made him very strong. He lived in the woods so much that he knew every tree and bush by its bark and leaves as far as he could see them. He learned the use of all the different kinds of timber. When he had time he loved to wander through the forest, and all his life he never forgot the beau-



ABRAHAM LINCOLN AFTER HE BECAME PRESIDENT

tiful things he saw there and the lessons Mother Nature taught him.

When the Lincolns had been in Indiana two years a great sorrow came to them. The children's mother died. After she was taken sick her husband and children nursed her the best they could, but there was not a doctor to be had, or comforts of any kind. When Nancy Lincoln died she was buried under a beautiful sycamore tree on a grassy knoll. Her husband cut down a tree and made the rough pine box to lay her body in. There was no preacher in that country and no one to say a prayer. But many bitter tears were shed by the little family when they laid their poor mother away.

Abe felt so sorry that there had been no preacher at his mother's funeral that he with much labor wrote his first letter to Daniel Elkin, the Baptist preacher he had loved so dearly in Kentucky. At that time a letter would be weeks in getting to the person to whom it was sent for it had to be carried on horseback through the woods.

When Mr. Elkin got the letter asking him to come to Indiana and preach a sermon over Nancy Lincoln's grave he sent back word that

he would come as soon as he could. The next summer when the trees were all out in leaf, the forest green and beautiful, and birds singing in the trees the good man kept his promise.

It was a forlorn little brood of children that lived in the Lincoln cabin after Mrs. Lincoln's death. Their cousin, Dennis Hanks, a little younger than Abe, lived with them. Their little housekeeper was twelve-year-old Sarah Lincoln. The family did not go hungry but the children got very ragged.

Then the next year Thomas Lincoln made a journey to Kentucky and brought back with him a new mother for his children. This was a very fortunate thing for she was a kind and good woman and loved the little Lincoln children as she did her own. She had been a widow, Mrs. Sally Johnson, formerly Miss Sally Bush. Her home had been at Elizabethtown, where Thomas Lincoln had first married, and she was not a stranger to the children to whom she came as a new mother. She had three children, two girls and a boy, and that made six children living in the little cabin.

The new Mrs. Lincoln brought a great wagon-load of furniture with her. You may be sure

little Abe's eyes grew big as he saw the fine things unloaded. There was a fine bureau with drawers of clothing, tables and chairs, and dishes. There were blankets, and quilts, and a big feather-bed.

The first thing the new mother did was to have a washstand set up by the door, and then she cleaned up the children and gave them good clothing. Then she got Thomas Lincoln to work, and with his carpenter tools he made a door for the cabin and fixed a frame with greased paper over it for a window. Skins were spread over a puncheon floor and the cabin looked quite cosy.

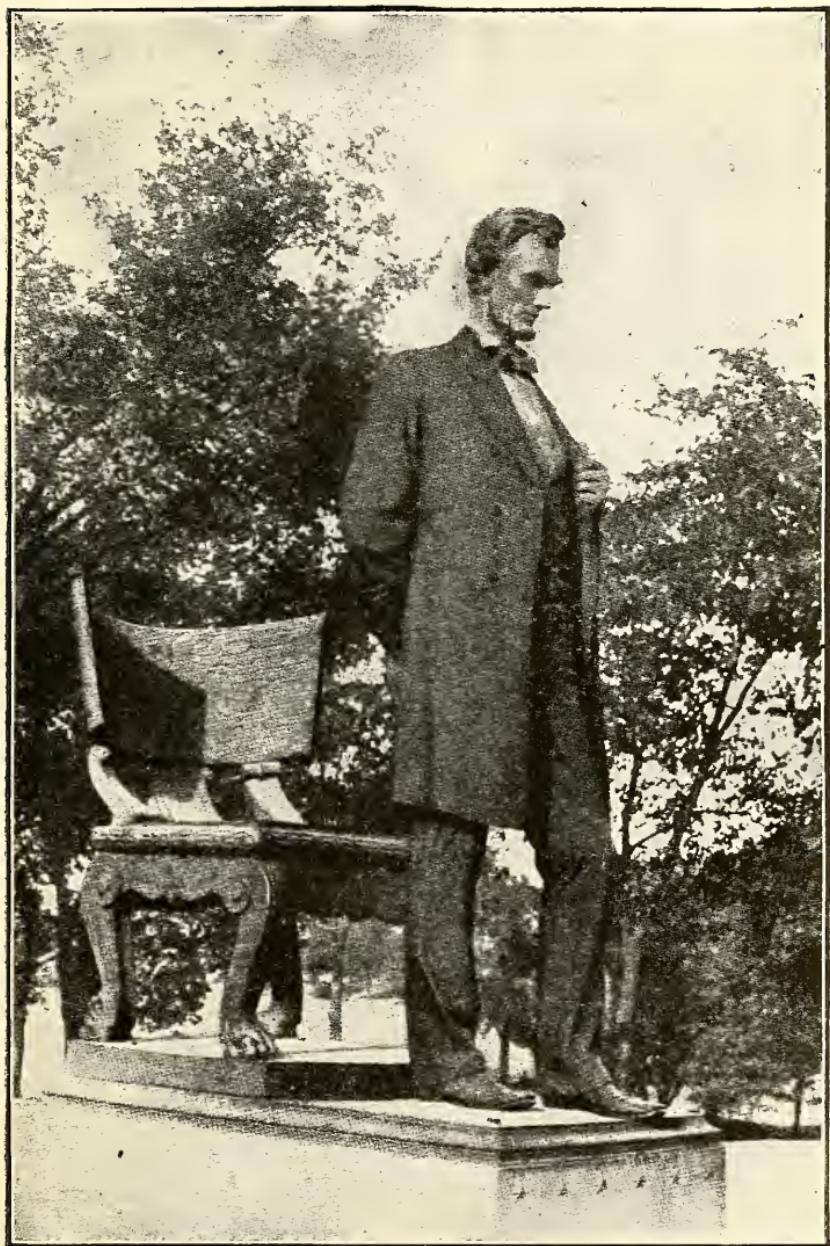
Abe was ten years old when his father married the second time and he was a very tall, strong boy for his age. He learned how to do all the different things a boy has to know on a farm, besides how to use his father's tools. When he was not busy at home helping his father he hired out to the neighbors. They paid his father twenty-five cents a day for his work, but this was when he grew older. He was so strong that he did not lack for work. He plowed, did carpenter work, and helped the women in the house. He was always ready to bring buckets

of water, or make fires, and even take care of the babies.

But better than anything else, he liked to go to mill. The corn had to be carried on horseback a long distance and at the mill each had to wait his turn. There, young Lincoln could tell and listen to stories and play games while waiting his turn.

But the boy's life was not all work. With such a big family of jolly boys and girls there was sure to be plenty of mischief and fun. The boys went fishing in the evenings and at the noon hour they wrestled, and jumped, and ran races. It is said he never missed a horse race or a fox hunt. In the winter evenings the children sat about the fire and told all the stories they knew, or they went to spelling matches or husking bees. But he was such a good speller that he was not allowed to take part in the matches, for if he did his side always beat.

When the three boys, Abraham Lincoln, John Johnston, and Dennis Hanks came home from the merry-making in the evenings, they climbed the ladder to their loft in the cabin. They all three slept together, and their bed was so narrow that when one turned over all three had to turn.



STATUE OF LINCOLN IN LINCOLN PARK, CHICAGO
Saint-Gaudens

Mrs. Lincoln sent the children to school whenever there was one, which was seldom. The school which they now had a chance to attend was a mile and a half away on Little Pigeon Creek. New settlers were coming in and a new schoolmaster had come also and given them this. All of the children of the Lincoln cabin went to this school and we can imagine the good times they had together.

The school house was built of logs, but so were the houses from which all of them came. Even the new meeting house, which was a grand affair for these woods, was built of logs up to the gables, and finished out with sawed boards, nearly the first used to any extent in that region.

Abe, altogether, did not go more than a year. But every spare moment he read and studied. His first books were the Bible, *Æsop's Fables*, *Robinson Crusoe*, and *Pilgrim's Progress*. Some of these he borrowed from the neighbors. One time he borrowed a book about Washington. He put the book in the loft in a crack between the logs. In the night a storm came up and the book got wet. He carried the book back to the owner and made a bargain with him to pull fodder for him three days to pay for the

spoiled book. Then the book became his and he was glad it all happened.

Abraham read all the books in the neighborhood and then was not satisfied. He went after every book he heard of. He once told some one that he read everything for fifty miles around. He also was great at asking questions. When he was a little fellow he would sit on the fence by the side of the road and ask questions of all that came by until they were out of hearing.

From the books he borrowed he wrote down things he wanted to remember. If he had no paper he wrote on a board and carried it in his pocket until he had learned what he had written. He had no slate or lead pencil so he did his sums on a wooden fireshovel with a charred stick. When he had the shovel covered he shaved the wood off and began again.

Whenever he went to work he carried a book in his pocket and at every chance out came the book and Abe was reading. He had a fine chance when he plowed, for at every round he had to rest the horses and sometimes had a half hour for study.

When he found the day too short for his school studies and the work about the farm, he sat up

late into the night reading, the light coming from the blaze of the "lightwood" fire in the fireplace.

When he was a grown man he made a speech on Henry Clay, the great statesman of whom in his youth he had thought so much. Among other things he said: "His example teaches us that one can scarcely be so poor, but that, if he will, he can acquire sufficient education to get through the world respectably." If this was true of the life of Henry Clay, it was equally true of Abraham Lincoln. And if it was true then, with the few opportunities for school, how much more now with schoolhouses and teachers provided for every child.

The boy was always kind and helpful to every one in trouble. Once he carried a worthless drunkard on his back a long distance and took care of him all night to keep him from freezing. He was always talking to his playmates about being kind to animals. He was so brave and strong himself that the other children listened to him and often did as he asked them.

When he was about seventeen years old, he went one day to the court house in a nearby county, and heard a great lawyer from Ken-

tucky make a speech in a trial for murder. It was the first great speech he had heard and from that time on he practiced making speeches. He took up any topic in which the people about him were interested in. His father had to stop his speeches in work hours, for he said: "When Abe begins to speak all hands flock to hear him."

One thing must be said of him, both as boy and young man; When he began to study anything, he was not satisfied until he got to the bottom of it. He wrote and rewrote all that he wanted to commit to memory, and he would never give up any hard problem.

After Lincoln was president and he had been so cruelly killed, his stepmother said this about him:

"Abe was a good boy, and I can say what scarcely one woman—a mother—can say in a thousand. Abe never gave me a cross word or look, and never refused, in fact or appearance, to do anything I requested him. I never gave him a cross word in my life. * * * * He was a dutiful son to me always. I think he loved me truly. I had a son John who was raised with Abe. Both were good boys; but I must

say that Abe was the best boy I ever saw or expect to see."

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